Temple Rodef Shalom

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Rosh Hashanah 5777/2016

Befriending the Stranger: A Sermon on the Refugee Crisis

My grandmother, Greta Stuehler, wept through the ceremony of her wedding. Of all the stories I heard from her, this image stuck in my mind. She wasn't an outwardly emotional person. I never saw her cry in my lifetime. I imagine her, with her small frame, curly brown hair and simple pearl earrings, standing beside my grandfather, Paul. I see this usually stoic woman, overcome by the contrast between the wedding she has always imagined and the one she is experiencing – the life she imagined and the one she now faces. Her father isn't there to give her away, or her mother to stand with her. They are totally on their own. It is 1938 in San Francisco, and Greta has just arrived two days before on a ship from Germany, with Paul waiting for her. Paul came earlier to establish residency and apply for her entry. This wedding is required to happen within three days to comply with the terms of her visa.

So there they stand under the *chuppah.* Paul is an only child, and his parents will be killed at Auschwitz. Greta's parents and two sisters will eventually settle in New York, three thousand miles away, and it will be seven years before she sees them. So, the joy my grandmother should be feeling at her wedding is crushed under the loneliness and disorientation of being a stranger.

Remembering this experience through my grandmother's stories, I am actually thankful that they were not really totally alone at their wedding. There was a "family" that stood around them: four friends, possibly the only people Greta even knew in America. Two were their new landlords, also Jewish and eager to help. They signed the *ketubah* as witnesses. The other couple were Greta and Paul's close friends from Germany. They had had a similar wedding weeks before.

These few connections slowly grew into a community of support. There were big things and small things: the landlords, who were willing to take them in before they had proved themselves as reliable tenants; my grandfather's employer in the leather company, who paid the extra cost for Greta and my mother – who was then two – to have a private room and bed for the five day train ride to see Greta's parents and sisters in New York. It was these people – employers and landlords, individuals and congregations, groups like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society or HIAS, local Jewish Family Service organizations, and many others. They are the reason many of our parents and grandparents – and even some members of this community themselves – were able to become successful American citizens. My grandmother lived until age 98 with money left in her savings, and a pension from her work as an insurance broker. But to get started, she needed help. I am deeply grateful that she received it.

We read in Leviticus, "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (19:34). This

commandment is at the core of Judaism's mission, echoed so many times. The spirit of this commandment is also an important part of the American mission: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free." At several important points in Jewish history, when we faced persecution, our ancestors have been allowed to come to this country and live a safer, freer life.

In the years since the American Jewish community has become secure and well-established, we have had opportunities to take our turn at welcoming the stranger to America. I am proud that in those times, Temple Rodef Shalom has stepped up. In the late 1970's, many Vietnamese people fled by boat after the Vietnam War. The Temple sponsored three of these families, renting apartments for them, settling them in and supporting them in many ways. We have done the same for Russian and Hungarian Jewish families over the years. Of all the social action activities in which TRS has engaged, this commitment stands out to me for the effort involved, the impact on people's lives, and the moral statement we've made.

Today, the current global refugee crisis presents us with another test of that American and Jewish mission. This test brings new issues and new difficulties. First, it is bigger, the worst refugee crisis in world history. There are over 65 million displaced people around the world. Second, it is more complex. While the Vietnamese families who came here in the 1970's were certainly strangers to us, many Americans felt a special obligation to them because of the US role in the instability in Vietnam that had put them in danger. Today, the refugees are coming from different places. The crisis's epicenter is the Middle East. Many of the refugees are from countries that are hostile to the West, and more personally to us, have been at war with Israel for 68 years. This is a great challenge. These refugees are strangers to us in a different way. What is our role in this crisis?

The Jewish commandment, to be kind to the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt, calls us to learn from our own past. So, let's explore these past experiences of the Jewish people. Genesis and Exodus tell us of our ancestors' encounters with two Pharaohs – not one good Pharaoh and one evil Pharaoh. They are not actually so different from each other. But they see the Israelites much differently. The first Pharaoh lives during the famine, when Jacob and his twelve clans come to Egypt for help. Since Jacob's son Joseph is Pharaoh's close advisor, the two elders meet face to face. Pharaoh asks Jacob about his life and Jacob blesses him. The people settle in Goshen, and Pharaoh hires some of them to look after his cattle. There is an immediate trust that comes from a common relationship and a person-to-person interaction.

Then comes the famous verse, "There arose a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). For this new leader, the Hebrews are unknown, and therefore suspect. They are even vulnerable to deep misunderstanding and, you could say, a distorted view of them. "Behold," the new Pharaoh says, "the Israelites are more numerous and stronger than we. Let us deal shrewdly with them" (Ex. 1:9-10). Really, the reader might ask? The Israelites are more numerous than the Egyptians? And stronger? I think we can say that this Pharaoh's lack of contact with the Hebrews has led him to some questionable conclusions. So, one Pharaoh knows the people, has them working in his pastures and sees them every day. To him they are individuals and

welcome newcomers. The other has no such connection. To him the Israelites are a faceless and threatening multitude, and under him they become slaves and their newborn sons are executed. The key to this difference is the presence of a relationship.

Let's move forward now, many years, to the experience of the Jews and others who needed refuge from Europe during the Second World War. These people, too, were total strangers to most Americans and got little sympathy. My grandparents were among only tens of thousands who were able to enter the US as immigrants between 1938 and 1948, a fraction of those in need. A Fortune Magazine poll in 1938 found that only five percent of Americans wanted to raise the immigration limits to allow more of these people in.[1]

But gradually, Americans began to learn about the plight of refugees in Europe. People's hearts were opened by seeing photographs of the liberation of the camps and hearing about the Jews, and many others, who were suffering the devastation of war. There were stories of American soldiers reaching a hand out to weakened survivors and befriending them. Americans began to feel connected to the refugees, and this changed everything. In 1948, Congress acted to expand the influx of war refugees from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands. This law set a new precedent for how America responds to refugee crises around the world, finally making good on the promise engraved on the Statue of Liberty.

I believe these stories show us the importance of a relationship in enabling us to feel the empathy the Torah commands us to feel. It's not enough just to know that we were once strangers in Egypt. We will not feel moved to help the stranger – we won't even feel safe welcoming the stranger or see him or her clearly – until we are able to relate directly with him or her.

With this in mind, the Temple's work has begun with building relationships in our own neighborhood. The first time I was invited to speak to a Muslim group, a young man thanked me. We were in the McLean High School auditorium on their holiest day of the year. After I offered them my wishes for an *Eid Mubarak,* a blessed Eid Day, this man said to me he never thought he would see a rabbi address his congregation. I hope that after a few years, he is no longer surprised. Since then, we and the McLean Islamic Center have done community service together, hosted each other many times and learned from one another. We have held dialogues on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – nobody's minds have been changed, but we have begun to understand and respect each other's perspectives. A highlight of our developing friendship has been the two weeks that MIC held their nightly Ramadan prayers in our Social Hall. I will never forget the pleasure and satisfaction expressed by our members that week. Some of us stood at the door and welcomed our guests into the building, and others proudly remember the unusual site of hundreds of Muslim prayer rugs on the floor of the Social Hall.

It's because of these efforts that we were able to go to the next step. In June, we gathered 200 members of TRS and the local Muslim community and hosted a welcome dinner for eight Syrian refugee families. Their children played with our teens in the South Wing. And, through a

translator, we heard their stories of waiting up to two years to come here; the exhausting and of course necessary process of being vetted and cleared for refugee status.

We met people who surprised us. One young woman told us about the loss of her brother, shot and killed in front of her family. She spoke with such eloquence and charisma that we were shocked to learn she was only 15 years old. A man told the story that soon after his arrival in Maryland, the governor asked to halt the settlement of Syrian refugees there. This man said it touched him deeply when he attended a protest and found a group from HIAS, the Jewish refugee resettlement agency, advocating on behalf of his cause. That evening was a rare opportunity for us to tell these newcomers to America that we supported them and wanted them here. And, it was a chance to see them face-to-face, and be seen by them – to begin this relationship. I am grateful that our congregation had the courage to welcome the stranger in this way.

And, I am proud that the Temple went further. In July, we became the sponsors of a refugee family: a single mother, Hadiyah, and her twin 12-year old boys. Hadiyah's husband was abducted when they were living in Iran. She fled with the boys to Turkey, and then, eventually, here. A group of our members have found this family an apartment in Tysons Corner and furnished it with items donated by the community. They have been helping Hadiyah learn English; find a job; enroll the boys in school; get around town, and countless other things. It is a big task, and our volunteers are doing a fantastic job, representing our congregation in doing something about the refugee crisis, in a real and personal way.

This group of Temple members is backed up by significant congregational support. When we began the process, we made an initial request to members, hoping we could raise twenty-five hundred dollars. Within two days, we got twenty five thousand from 140 donors. This fully pays our sponsorship costs of twenty thousand dollars, most of which is for rental subsidy. Seventy TRS members also offered their time to help, which is more than we can accommodate for this one family. But others have already found their own way to volunteer: this year's adult B'nai Mitzvah class took it upon themselves to furnish and prepare an apartment for another refugee family to call their new home.

There is more we can do as a congregation. We can join with the Reform Movement in advocating for America to uphold its history of supporting refugees. The U.S. resettlement system is underfunded and mired in red tape. It has to be rebuilt. And, our country needs to do more, while ensuring proper vetting, to take in refugees in numbers that reflect our role as the leading nation of the world.

The narrative of our people being strangers and finding home is our most powerful foundational story. There are figures in that story who play important roles: the Pharaoh who welcomed them and the one who enslaved them; the taskmasters who beat them; the midwives who refused to kill the newborn sons; Pharaoh's daughter, who reached into the basket and embraced Moses as her son; and the Egyptian neighbors who gave the Israelites valuables for their journey.

For many of this country's newest residents, the upcoming holiday of Thanksgiving is like our Passover. They take time to recall what America has done for them, how their lives have changed and what they are grateful for. It's in such moments that my grandmother would tell me about their first landlords in 1938 and the other mentors who helped them along the way.

In the generations to come, as today's refugees retell their own foundational narratives, what role will we play in their story? As individuals and as a Jewish community, what will they say about us? I want us to be among those who were the first to shake their hands and offer them a meal. I want them to remember us defending their right to be free and safe. When we look back, I hope we will be able to say we lived up to our sacred obligation to welcome the stranger. I hope we will be among the people who have helped them on their journey, as we were helped on ours.

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[1] Ishaan Tharoor, "What Americans Thought About Refugees on the Eve of World War II," *Washington Post,* Nov. 17, 2015